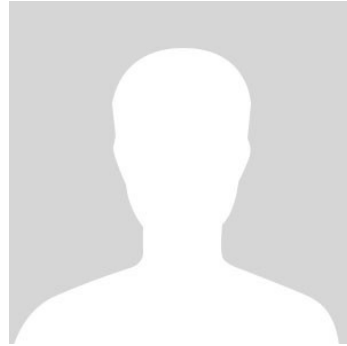


# Race & Podcast Shownotes

## *American Architecture as a Settler Colonial Project: Central Park's Lost Village*

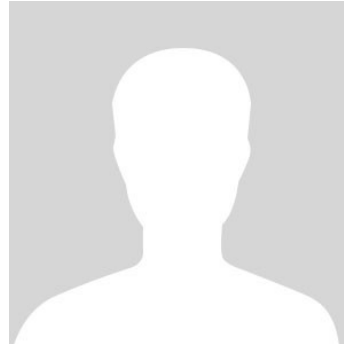
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# Race & Podcast Shownotes

## *American Architecture as a Settler Colonial Project: Central Park's Lost Village*

### TRANSCRIPT

[LEE] Today we want to take a trip to a park..and not just to any park, but to Central Park, a geographic landmark nestled within Manhattan's hard orthogonal grid. Central Park is an essential component of New York City's iconography...it is a destination flocked to by the millions every year, with its rigid, rectilinear boundaries, there are ponds, reservoirs, and meandering winding paths.

I'm Grace Lee and I'm Evan Crawford and this is The Lost Village and today we are exploring the complex history of Central Park and the legacy of Seneca Village.

[CRAWFORD] Starting with the origins of Seneca Village, we will then be discussing the mass displacement of its residents and razing of the terrain to build Central Park. In particular, we are interested in how settler colonialism is enacted not just through the act of building Central Park, but in Frederick Law Olmstead's design for the park space.

[LEE] How would you feel if you were forced to move to accommodate a new park "for the people"--a move that would eviscerate your community while being told that it was for all for the greater good of the city?

Through conversations on the necessity and lived experience of the Village, we mine what shadows it brings forth to our contemporary world--to our politics of difference, separation, and othering--themes manifested through urban renewal and gentrification-- which we view as evolved forms of the same challenges faced by Seneca Village in 1858.

[CRAWFORD] The southern border lies one block from billionaires row and to the north we reach Harlem, the divisive power of the Park to pull apart and make separate social classes becomes all too clear. The park provides for the city what a self-styled 1909 "lover of art and of humanity" called "the lungs of the city...a place to just...breathe..." or a refuge from the ills of modern city life--a story advertised as open for all, yet at the expense of some. Today we explore the some -- the many silenced voices of the diverse Seneca Village- one of Manhattan's first predominantly Black neighborhoods....over 220 residents, 50 homes, 3 churches, heterogeneous community--vanished, only leaving behind cold foundations buried -- what were once permanent two-story homes turned into rubble, indistinguishable from the rolling hills of Manhattan's mid 19th century landscape..what is left now?

Living history is resurrected through the stories of excavators and historians, like Cynthia Copeland and descendants of Seneca Village's original inhabitants. These oral histories maintain the narrative of a strong, vibrant community of great difference, but simultaneously of solidarity--of facing the social mores of the time -- in redefining what community could be and what it means to be limited in urban space as the evolving definition of "other."

Seneca Village was first settled by freed African-Americans in 1825, when parcels of land in the area were subdivided and sold off. During this time, most of Manhattan's settlers, including freed African-Americans, lived below 14th Street, in what we now consider to be lower Manhattan, in crowded tenement housing. The residents of Seneca Village came from many backgrounds and defied their contemporary norms--collecting in one community a legion of labor workers, waiters, shoemakers, and domestic workers.....they organized themselves around institutions like schools and churches--each a pillar of their communal values--of growth and of fellowship across difference.

By the 1840s, German and Irish settlers began moving into Seneca. By the following decade, two-thirds of the residents were African-Americans and one-third were Irish immigrants, and a few were German immigrants. At that time, Seneca Village existed as a rare model of an integrated neighborhood, as there was intermarriage and religious inclusivity. In relation to greater Manhattan, and the expanded national and global context, Seneca Village could be seen as socially exceptional--operating under an exceptionalism which, while positive for the community, would later be weaponized by the dominant society as a way to demonize its inhabitants, and cast them further from significance--using their existence as a direct tool in service of their elimination.

Perhaps a concern of highest significance at stake were the voting rights of Seneca Village's inhabitants. Legislative representation was very hard to come by at this time, especially for marginalized groups, of whom Seneca Village was wholly composed.

[DIANA WALL] There was an amendment to the New York state constitution, that said that if you were an African-American, you would be able to vote if you owned \$250 or more property and if you had resided in New York for more than three years.

[LEE] That was Diana Wall, an anthropology professor at the City College of New York.

[CRAWFORD] The peaceful refuge, once home to a thriving community could only last so long, this community, whose existence was a threat to the expansion of white territory, would be the next target of New York City's white society, which sought an escape from downtown and reconnection with nature at any cost. The majority's thoughts collected, and were empowered through publications such as the New York Times -- soon, the residents of Seneca Village and the territory of what would become Central Park were faced with eminent domain actions by the city of New York. Quickly, racist and xenophobic outlets, and politicians decried the village -- damning them -- positioning them as the source of their own eviction notices. Through visual descriptions such as homes in disrepair, described as "shacks" or "shanties" -- on the "verge of collapse" and even "barely standing", media interests twisted this quote unquote "sanctuary" into a den of itinerant drifters or squatters. These portrayals show a complete disregard of Seneca Village's solidity, and foundation which was cultivated since 1825.

Seneca Village -- the pastoral community between 82nd and 89th Street on the west side of Manhattan founded on ideals of equality, togetherness, and

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in stark contrast to its contemporary segregation – with its 50 homes, 3 churches, and over 220 residents, became at once property of the State.

Because of the biased and ill intentions of reporting on Seneca Village at the time, it remains difficult for contemporary historians to research and contextualize the dispersed residents' stories after they were evicted. We still don't really know where most Seneca residents moved afterwards, outside of a few key members. These thoughts may cause us to question.....how can we trust the historical archives on Seneca Village when it was created out of racism and greed?

[LEE] Starting in 1858, the construction of Central Park took almost two decades and thousands of workers to complete. The designs that Olmsted put forth required extreme modification of the existing landscape, as swamps were filled, and rocky terrains were blasted and leveled with gunpowder. When it finally opened in 1876, there were windy paths designed for strolling and carriage rides and large open spaces for passive leisure. Nature within the park was no longer native, but rather artificially composed to be viewed as frames and scenes of landscapes.

Behind this rolling landscape is a fabrication of nature by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, constructed in 1858. For Olmsted, Central Park is often seen as his

magnum opus – the greatest expression of 19th-century pleasure parks. He is often referred to as the father of American landscape architecture, as his work on Central Park propelled him to be commissioned for dozens of similar urban parks across the country. Some of his other prominent works include Prospect Park in nearby Brooklyn, the grounds of the U.S. Capitol, and the Chicago World's Fair in 1893.

At the time, urban planners and landscape architects believed that constructing urban parks had health and moralistic benefits, as park spaces were a respite from overcrowding and unsanitary living conditions. They believed that the presence of the park could unite residents across class divides, where this reinsertion of artificial nature into the urban sphere was thought to have a civilizing effort on urban dwellers, who were living in the industrial and capitalist city.

Emblematic of the dominant thinking at the time, Frederick Law Olmsted believed that there was an inherent link between morality, health, and the beautification of green spaces. In imitating a picturesque rendering of wilderness in the urban parks he constructed, he attempted to offer a pastoral antidote to and a retreat from the unfavorable social circumstances of a city. Nonetheless, Olmsted aimed to create a sense of wilderness to create this retreat from urbanity. Therefore, a pastoral landscape influenced by British picturesque gardens and Parisian promenades would mediate this sharp contrast between nature and civilization.

These precedents also demonstrate how New York City, specifically Central Park, served as an important outpost for the American frontier colony. Olmsted and Vaux wanted Central Park to compete with these famous European park spaces and garner international attention and attendance. It was within this settler colonialist zeitgeist that Central Park was created, where territorial expansion was achieved through the invasion and subsequent elimination of the existing population. The erasure of Seneca Village and surrounding neighborhoods gave way to Olmsted's reassertion of the space as a "natural" terrain. The dominant narrative of Central Park's transformation from an untamed tabula rasa wilderness to the tamed, domesticated urban park is an unacknowledged story of settler colonialism.

Much has been made about Olmsted's many parks across the country as a people's park, but what's glaringly missing is any acknowledgement of race and racism... and the role these structures played in shaping Olmsted's approach to the landscape. His 19th century publications might suggest a disgust with slavery and its consequences –but not on the human health or dignity of the enslaved, but on what he saw as the decline of economy and social morale of white Southerners.

The origins of Manhattan began as a colonial outpost, when the Dutch stole the island from the Lenapes and founded New Amsterdam in 1624. Manhattan was at the center of the Dutch colonization and trading efforts, continuously expanding northward from lower to uptown Manhattan, and then into the outer boroughs including Brooklyn and Queens. We see this history of settler colonialism repeatedly through the planning history of New York City, where Black spaces are still spaces of contention, from Seneca Village, to what we now refer to as mid-20th century urban renewal, to the current gentrification and erasure of Black neighborhoods like Harlem and Brooklyn.

[CYNTHIA COPELAND] Land, property ownership, that's how you get wealth and you pass wealth on from generation to generation. But you're getting a bulldozer that comes through because a new highway has to come through, or a new hospital or development site has to come in. Seneca Village was no different. It's time that we own it and we come to recognize that there are these great stories that live beneath the surface of the park. It's not just African-American history. It's just American history.

[LEE] That was Cynthia Copeland, a historian and the president of the Institute for the Exploration of Seneca Village History.

[CRAWFORD] In most people's imagination, Central Park is this beautiful, expansive natural retreat in the middle of Manhattan. It's perceived to be a democratic, public space, often referred to as a "park for the people. It remains ungated and free to access, but in reality it's not a neutral place, due to its overlooked origins and the continuing inequality that exists in New York City beyond Central Park's boundaries.



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Alongside so many incidents that are never recorded or publicized, there are two key events that are clear reminders of racial inequity. In 1989, 5 Black Harlem teens from the ages of 14 to 16 were accused and wrongfully convicted of the assault and murder of a white woman, which relied on manufactured evidence to deliver what the police called "swift justice." We now refer to this incident as the Central Park Five case. Even closer to our time, 2020's infamous birdwatching incident in the Ramble, where a 57 year old birdwatcher, Christian Cooper faced violence at his suggestion of a white woman putting her dog on a leash--His accuser directly invoking his blackness as encouragement for police to arrive faster to an assault that never occurred. These incidents of racial violence show that Olmsted's intended narratives of refuge and escape from the city do not hold true for marginalized and non-white residents.

[LEE] For more information on topics discussed in the Lost Village , including gentrification, urban renewal, Olmstead's legacy, contemporary case studies, and further links and resources, please visit this episode's show notes.